

BACKGROUND: MR. PRESIDENT

The Men Who Wrote the Constitution

The fifty-five men who met together in Philadelphia to write a constitution for the new nation were a remarkable collection of talented, educated, and experienced leaders. These practical men were often successful merchants, lawyers, and politicians.

The most important member of the convention was a 36 year-old scholarly lawyer from Virginia, James Madison, who became known as the "Father of the Constitution." Madison believed the country needed a new form of a strong, national government with supremacy over the states. He believed such a government would reduce economic and social differences between the states. George Washington wanted the new government to have real power. He knew from his Revolutionary War experiences, the dangers that would exist if the government remained a weak and squabbling collection of independent states. Other advocates of a strong government were Alexander Hamilton, Benjamin Franklin, and Edmund Randolph.



A Clash of Ideas

There were many sources of arguments and serious disputes during the convention. These included the role of slavery in the new nation and the conflicts between large and small states. The large states were worried they would be crippled by laws and taxes forced upon them by the small states. The small states feared they would be outvoted and overwhelmed by the more populated larger states like Virginia.

The Idea of the Presidency

The entire idea of the presidency was a new and dangerous concept to many of the founders. Some, like Elbridge Gerry and John Dickinson, feared the idea of an elected king, a ruler with too much power who would destroy their liberties and ignore the wishes of individuals and states. They distrusted power and wanted a very weak executive leader. They didn't even want him to have a fancy title that sounded royal.

On the other hand, Alexander Hamilton, a young New York representative and a rising political figure, supported a very strong leader with near king-like powers. Madison and Edmund Randolph favored a very strong presidency with a great deal of power. They feared the nation would be destroyed by foreign powers or remain a group of squabbling small states if they didn't have a strong president.

Despite their differences, the founders hammered out a compromise that has worked remarkably well for over 200 years. The arguments about how strong a president should be are still debated today.

SCRIPT SUMMARY: MR. PRESIDENT

This script is an abbreviated account of the intense discussions about the idea of the presidency conducted by the delegates to the Constitutional Convention. The narrator introduces the discussion and sets the lines between those who favor a strong chief executive, a powerful president, and those who want the role of the president tightly limited.

James Madison and Alexander Hamilton took the lead in forcefully arguing for a strong, powerful, almost king-like president. Elbridge Gerry and John Dickinson were leading members of the convention who wanted the president to be quite weak and totally controlled by laws and Congress. They even argued about the name for the president with Madison and Hamilton favoring a fancy, almost royal title, and Dickinson and Gerry wanting no suggestions of power or royalty.

Benjamin Franklin, in his usual shrewd way, gets to the gist of the problem and suggests a solution that allows enough power but not too much. His suggestion for the simple term "Mr. President" is respectful but doesn't have any suggestion of royal power or hints of special privilege. The title, "Mr. President," is still used today.

Assignment

Read the readers' theater script entitled "Mr. President" about the Constitutional Convention. Work within your group to prepare for the performance. The seven readers need to create a sense of the intensity of the argument and the reasons for it. Share your interpretation of the script with your team. Practice different expressions that would help highlight the serious passages and the humor in certain situations. Make sure each reader is well-practiced, clear, loud, and easy to understand. Present the script to your audience.

SCRIPT: MR. PRESIDENT

This script is an abbreviated account of the discussions at the Constitutional Convention relating to the nature of the Presidency that the Founding Fathers were creating. There are seven speaking parts.

Narrator: The delegates to the Constitutional Convention were deeply divided over who should lead the new government they were creating. Some delegates, like Alexander Hamilton, wanted a president to serve for many years or even a lifetime, like a king. Others wanted the office to have little real power and the term to be only one or two years.

Edmund Randolph: What we need to create, Gentlemen, is a strong national government with a congress to make laws, a president to enforce those laws, and a judicial branch to determine that they are fair and equitable. Our poor nation right now is a collection of weak and arguing states that do not trust each other. They impose taxes on each other, and sometimes are even at the point of war.

John Dickinson: We just got rid of one king. I'll not have another one. Keep the states as they are.

Elbridge Gerry: We were sent here to revise the Articles of Confederation—not to form a nation with a king or some other powerful leader.

Alexander Hamilton: This country needs strong leadership—otherwise it is going to be gobbled up by European empires. What we need is a president for life.

John Dickinson: No, I don't agree. A president with very little power is what we desire. The weaker he is the safer we will be. One year is long enough for any president.

James Madison: He has to be strong or this nation will blow away like leaves in the wind with every state going broke, being swallowed up by other countries, or always getting into wars.

Elbridge Gerry: I don't trust any ruler. All he will want to do is raise taxes and get us into war. He will end up a king with a different title.

SCRIPT: MR. PRESIDENT (cont.)

- James Madison:** This country needs leadership. We cannot afford to have a weak or feeble chief executive. He must be able to act with force when necessary.
- Narrator:** Many delegates were fearful that the presidency would pass from father to son like a monarchy or that the president would rule the country without regard to the congress or the rule of law.
- Elbridge Gerry:** Why does it have to be a president for life—why not six years or four or one year?
- Alexander Hamilton:** Well, it would be embarrassing to have a lot of ex-presidents wandering around like ghosts with nothing much to do.
- Benjamin Franklin:** But suppose you had a lifetime president or even one with a six-year term, and he turned out to be a worthless president. What could you do about it? We might have to arrange some way to get rid of a president who is incompetent or sick or who commits a crime. Otherwise, we might have to shoot him.
- Narrator:** Many of the delegates were amused by Ben Franklin's suggestion, but they also recognized the problem. What would ex-presidents do? Would they go back home to their businesses and farms or would they find other jobs in government? The delegates were also uncertain what to call the leader of this new office they were creating.
- Elbridge Gerry:** How will we address this president?
- Alexander Hamilton:** I think that he should be called His Highness or His Excellency.
- Elbridge Gerry:** Sounds just like a king to me or some other high-fallutin' gentry.
- Benjamin Franklin:** How about just plain, Mister, such as Mr. Randolph or Mr. Madison?
- Elbridge Gerry:** How about Mr. President? It's simple, dignified, and it doesn't put on airs.
- John Dickinson:** That sounds just right.

READER'S RESPONSE: MR. PRESIDENT

Directions

- These discussion activities and questions may be used in small groups or with the entire class. They may also be used by the actors as a part of their preparation for the reading.
- Refer to the script "Mr. President" when responding to all questions. You may also find useful facts in the background information section.
- Make notes on the lines provided below each question before your group discussion.

General Discussion

1. With which character in the script do you most agree? Why?

2. Do you think presidents should have more power or less power than they have today? Prepare at least three reasons to support your opinion.

3. What are the qualifications, abilities, and skills you want a president of the United States to possess? Explain the value of each qualification you suggest.

4. How often should presidents be elected? Give two reasons supporting your choice.

5. What should be done about a president who commits a crime, gets extremely ill, becomes mentally incompetent, or is extremely incompetent?

Making It Personal

Would you want to be President of the United States when you grow up? Write at least three serious, thoughtful, and intelligent reasons for your answer.
